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# **It's People, Not Programs**



Outstanding educators know that if a school has great teachers, it is a great school. Without great teachers, the school lacks the keystone of greatness. More importantly, all their audiences take the same view. If my third-grade daughter has a great teacher, I think highly of her school. Otherwise, I see her school as less than stellar—no matter how many awards she wins, no matter how many students earn top test scores, no matter how many plaques adorn the main office. Students share this perspective; if a high-school sophomore has four great teachers each day (out of four!), then believe me, that sophomore will think the school is great. As the quality of teachers drops, so does a student's opinion of the school. All the way from kindergarten through college, the quality of the teachers determines our perceptions of the quality of the school.

### **It's People, Not Programs**

School improvement is actually a very simple concept. However, like many simple concepts, it is not easy to accomplish. There are really two ways to improve a school significantly:

- ♦ Get better teachers.
- ♦ Improve the teachers in the school.

We can spend a great deal of time and energy looking for programs that will solve our problems. Too often, these programs do not bring the improvement or growth we seek. Instead, we must focus on what really matters. It is never about programs; it is always about people. This does not mean that no program can encourage or support improvement of people within our school; however, no program inherently leads to

that improvement. Believe me, if there were such a program, it would already be in place in our schools.

Each of us can think of many innovations that were touted as *the* answer in education. Too often, we expect them to solve all our woes. When they do not, we see them as the problem. However, we must keep in mind that *programs are never the solution, and they are never the problem*. Back to basics, whole language, direct instruction, assertive discipline, open classrooms, the Baldrige model, state standards, mission statements, goal setting, site-based management: There is nothing inherently right or wrong with any of these ideas. We may have a fondness for one that has met with success, or deep-seated resentment because another has been forced down people's throats. If we take a closer look at some examples, however, we might see what effective teachers never forget. It is people, not programs, that determine the quality of a school.

## How Open Classrooms Got Started

Some of you may know the true history of the open classroom movement. I do not claim any expertise about this topic—but, for what it's worth, I'll share my vision of how the concept took off.

The scene is an elementary school in Anywhere, USA. At the faculty meeting just before the start of school, the principal announces that he has good news and bad news. The good news is, enrollment is higher than anticipated. The bad news is, he needs a teacher to volunteer to teach in the old auxiliary gymnasium. Awkward silence; every teacher avoids eye contact with the principal. Finally, someone raises her hand to volunteer—and not surprisingly, it's Mrs. Smith, the school's best teacher.

Some teachers in her shoes, might block off a classroom-sized rectangle and keep the students inside it. But this dynamic teacher uses every inch of space, even creating homey nooks and crannies. Then (as often happens in rapidly growing schools), within weeks the principal makes another announcement: He needs to move another class into the gym.

After a little hemming and hawing, guess who raises her hand? The second best teacher in the school, Mrs. Jones. Together, these outstanding teachers create a phenomenal environment in that old musty gym—so much excitement, energy, and engagement in learning that it gives you goose bumps just to walk in.

Later that year, visitors to Anywhere Elementary School walk around to all the classrooms. Where do they see the best teaching and learning? That's right! In the old auxiliary gym. They conclude that open classrooms are the secret to good teaching—and the rest is history.

Ironically, the cycle has come around; now everyone looks askance at open classrooms. Granted, some teachers, especially those who lack solid classroom management skills, may struggle in this environment. What's more, the noise they and their students generate may keep anyone else from sharing space with them effectively. And yet for some of the most dynamic and creative teachers, the open classroom may easily be the *best* teaching environment.

What really energized the Anywhere Elementary School gym was the presence of excellent teachers, not the absence of walls dividing their classrooms. As educators, we must understand that programs are not solutions. We must adopt changes only if they make us better. Here is another all-too-common example involving a classroom management approach.

### **Assertive Discipline—the Problem or the Solution?**

All of us are probably familiar with some version of assertive discipline. Typically, if a student misbehaves the teacher writes the student's name on the board. If the same student misbehaves again, the teacher puts a checkmark by the name. For each instance of inappropriate behavior, the teacher adds another checkmark. Specific, predetermined consequences apply for various numbers of checkmarks.

Some people swear by this approach; others swear at it. I have worked with many schools and districts that require as-

sertive discipline and many that officially oppose it. I believe that these schools and districts, in viewing assertive discipline as either a solution or a problem, have lost sight of the critical factor: the teacher.

Mrs. Hamilton was the best teacher I ever worked with. I had the good fortune to spend seven years in the same school with her as an assistant principal and then principal. During that time, I made at least two hundred informal visits to her classroom. In a casual conversation just before I moved out of state to take another position, Mrs. Hamilton mentioned that she was thinking of not using assertive discipline in her class the next year. I was stunned; *I had never known* that she used assertive discipline. Why did I not know? Well, I rarely saw anyone's name on the board, and I never noticed a student's name with a checkmark beside it. Her classroom management skills were as polished as her teaching.

Mrs. Hamilton did not see assertive discipline as a necessary classroom management approach. However, if I had decided that assertive discipline was wrong and banned it in our school, would that have helped her as a teacher? If assertive discipline gave her confidence, then the students and our school were better for it.

Now, you may be thinking that assertive discipline seems to be the best approach. Of course, if this were true, every teacher would use it and thrive in their classrooms. Well, I'd like you to meet Mr. Lewis, a teacher from my first year as a principal.

In the second week of school, I decided to make the rounds of my teachers' classrooms. At twenty-six—younger than every teacher in the school—I was a little hesitant to visit classes, but I knew that this was the best way to help improve instruction. So, I walked in to Mr. Lewis's third period English class. I quickly realized that he was quite familiar with assertive discipline. On the board were the names of about a dozen students. The last one was Ricky—written in letters a foot high, with at least five checkmarks, each one larger than the one before. The last checkmark was three feet tall from point to tip. At the board, hunched over like a leprechaun, Mr. Lewis

was aggressively gesturing toward the student, "Come on! You want another one!"

Clearly, assertive discipline was not working here. I might have tried to find a "better" technique, but this would merely have placed a new, equally ineffective bandage over the same gaping wound. Assertive discipline was not the problem; Mr. Lewis was the problem. On the other hand, while assertive discipline was not a problem in Mrs. Hamilton's classroom, neither was it the solution. Mrs. Hamilton was the solution.

### **It's Not What You Do, It's How You Do It**

All teachers are aware that the students in their schools have individual needs. Educators need to be equally aware that faculty members also vary in their individual abilities and approaches. Whether the arena is classroom management or instructional techniques, effective educators focus on the people, not on the programs. They see programs as solutions only when the programs bring out the best in their teachers.

Take, for example, the whole language–phonics debate. When we took basal readers away from every teacher, we took away the support that some teachers needed just to survive in the classroom. However, by requiring all teachers to center on phonetics, we may have lost some of the best instruction that others had to offer.

Another recent example is the debate over praise and rewards for students. Like many issues, its merits cannot be decided by discussion alone. Otherwise, by now we would know whether praising or rewarding students actually motivates them to do better. Some of our best teachers praise and/or reward their students; so do some of our least effective teachers. What matters is not whether they do it, but how appropriately and effectively they do it.

### **The Poor Lecturer's Classroom**

How many of us have ever been in a poor lecturer's classroom? Probably almost every one of us, at one time or another. When I say, "poor lecturer's classroom," which of these three

words captures the problem? (I'll give you a hint—it isn't "classroom.") Most people respond, "lecturer"—but that's not right either. An effective lecturer can hold a class spell-bound, delivering important information in a way that makes sense, laying the groundwork for active learning. The word that captures the problem here is "poor."

If you peeked into that classroom, you might think, "Can't the teacher see that the students are bored stiff?" Well, if her students have looked that way for 23 years, why should she catch on now? Or if his classroom is quiet for the first time all day, why should he stir things up?

But banning lectures from our classrooms won't improve our schools. The person, not the practice, needs to change. And, as we mentioned in Chapter 1, the first step may be the hardest: The teacher must recognize the need to improve.